

James Madison to Samuel H. Smith, November 4, 1826.

TO SAMUEL HARRISON SMITH.¹

¹ From the original owned by the late J. Henley Smith of Washington. Smith's address was printed in 1827 (Washington): "Memoir of the life, character and writings of Thomas Jefferson; delivered in the Capitol, before the Columbian institute on the sixth of January, 1827, and published at their request."

Montpellier, Novr. 4, 1826.

Dear Sir I have recd. your letter of Ocr. 25 requesting from me any information which would assist you in preparing a memoir of Mr. Jefferson for the Columbian Institute. Few things would give me more pleasure than to contribute to such a task; and the pleasure would certainly be increased by that of proving my respect for your wishes. I am afraid however, I can do little more than refer you to other sources, most of them probably already known to you.

It may be proper to remark that Mr. Ths. Jefferson Randolph, Legatee of the Manuscripts of Mr. Jefferson, is about to publish forthwith a Memoir left by his grandfather in his own hand writing, and if not in every part intended by him for the press, is thought to be throughout in a state well fitted for it. The early parts are I believe purely, and in some instances, minutely biographical; and the sequel, embracing a variety of matter, some of it peculiarly valuable, is continued to his acceptance of the Secretaryship of State under the present constitution of the U. States. Should this work appear in time, it would doubtless furnish your pencil with some of the best materials for your portrait.¹

¹ The work was printed by Thomas Jefferson Randolph. It may be seen in the *Works of Jefferson* (P. L. Ford), Federal Edition, i., 3.

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The period between his leaving Congress in 1776, and his mission to France, was filled chiefly by his labours on the Revised Code,—the preparation of his “Notes on Virginia” (an obiter performance):— his Governorship of that State:—and by his services as a member of Congress, and of the Committee of the States at Annapolis.

The Revised code in which he had a masterly share, exacted perhaps the most severe of his public labours. It consisted of 126 Bills,

comprizing and recasting the whole statutory code, British & Colonial, then admitted to be in force, or proper to be adopted, and some of the most important articles of the unwritten law, with original laws on particular subjects; the whole adapted to the Independent & Republican form of Government. The work tho' not enacted in the mass, as was contemplated, has been a mine of Legislative wealth, and a model of statutory composition, containing not a single *superfluous* word, and preferring always words & phrases of a meaning fixed as much as possible by oracular treatises, or solemn adjudications.

His “Notes on Virginia” speak for themselves.

For his administration of the Govt. of Virginia, the latter chapters of the 4th vol. of Burke's history continued by Gerardine, may be consulted. They were written with the advantage of Mr. Jefferson's papers opened fully by himself to the author. To this may now be added his letter just published from Mr. Jefferson to Majr. H. Lee, which deserves particular notice, as an exposure & correction of historical errors, and rumoured falsehoods, assailing his reputation.

His services at Annapolis will appear in the Journals of Congress of that date. The answer of Congress to the resignation of the Commander in Chief, an important document, attracts attention by the shining traces of his pen.

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His diplomatic agencies in Europe are to be found only in the unpublished archives at Washington, or in his private correspondence, as yet under the seal of confidence. The Memoir in the hands of his Grandson will probably throw acceptable lights on this part of his history.

The University of Virginia, as a temple dedicated to science & Liberty, was after his retirement from the political sphere, the object nearest his heart, and so continued to the close of his life. His devotion to it was intense, and his exertions unceasing. It bears the stamp of his genius, and will be a noble monument of his fame. His general view was to make it a nursery of Republican patriots as well as genuine scholars. You will be able to form some idea of the progress and scope of the Institution from the 2 inclosed Reports from the Rector for the Legislature (the intermediate Report is not at hand) which as they belong to official sets, you will be so good as to send back at your entire leisure. I may refer also to a very graphic & comprehensive exposé of the present state of the University, lately published in the "National Intelligencer," which will have fallen under your eye.

Your request includes "his general habits of study." With the exception of an intercourse in a session of the Virginia Legislature in 1776, rendered slight by the disparity between us, I did not become acquainted with Mr. Jefferson till 1779, when being a member of the Executive Council, and he the Governor, an intimacy took place. From that date we were for the most part separated by different walks in public & private life, till the present Govr.. brought us together, first when he was Secretary of State and I a member of the House of Reps.; and next, after an interval of some years, when we entered, in another relation, the service of the U. S. in 1801. Of his earlier habits of study therefore I can not particularly speak. It is understood that whilst at College [Wm. & Mary] he distinguished himself in all the branches of knowledge taught there; and it is known that he never after ceased to cultivate them. The French language he had learned when very young, and became very familiar with it, as he did with the literary treasures which it contains. He read, and at one time spoke the Italian also; with a competent knowledge of Spanish; adding

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to both the Anglo-Saxon, as a root of the English, and an element in legal philosophy. The Law itself he studied to the bottom, and in its greatest breadth, of which proofs were given at the Bar which he attended for a number of years, and occasionally throughout his career. For all the fine arts, he had a more than common taste; and in that of architecture; which he studied in both its useful, and its ornamental characters, he made himself an adept; as the variety of orders and stiles, executed according to his plan founded on the Grecian & Roman models and under his superintendence, in the Buildings of the University fully exemplify. Over & above these acquirements, his miscellaneous reading was truly remarkable, for which he derived leisure from a methodical and indefatigable application of the time required for indispensable objects, and particularly from his rule of never letting the sun rise before him. His relish for Books never forsook him, not even in his infirm years and in his devoted attention to the rearing of the University, which led him often to express his regret that he was so much deprived of that luxury, by the epistolary tasks, which fell upon him, and which consumed his health as well as his time. He was certainly one of the most learned men of the age. It may be said of him as has been said of others that he was a “walking Library,” and what can be said of but few such prodigies, that the Genius of Philosophy ever walked hand in hand with him.

I wish, Sir, I could have made you a communication less imperfect. All I say beyond it is that if in the progress of your pen, any particular point should occur on which it may be supposed I could add to your information from other sources, I shall cheerfully obey your call as far as may be in my power.

The subject of this letter reminds me of the “History of the administration of Mr. Jefferson,” my copy of which, with other things disappeared from my collection during my absence from the care of them. It would be agreeable to me now to possess a copy and if you can *conveniently* favor me with one, I shall be greatly obliged.

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Accept, Sir, assurances of my continued esteem & regard, with a tender of my best respects to Mrs. Smith.